

ON WARLOCKS AND WHALES

By Amílcar D'Avila de Mello¹

The oldest fishermen of Siriú Beach, Garopaba, Santa Catarina State, Brazil, swear that a long time ago a warlock named Nilton, the black man, used to live there. He was regarded as the best whale hunter of that stretch of the South Atlantic. A sorcerer in whaling? The question rang a bell: I had read something similar in Hermann Melville's *Moby Dick*. Was sorcery on board whaling boats a common denominator in the folklore of both American and Brazilian seafarers? By narrowing down the focus on these two stories, and drawing on historical and literary data as well as on the oral tradition of that fishermen's community in Brazil, some surprising similarities between them were exposed.

An excellent description of whaling in southern Brazil is provided by the naturalist Baron Georg H. Langsdorff who visited the Island of Santa Catarina in 1803. This famous voyager offered a detailed account of the islanders' way of life. Particularly interesting is his description of a whaling outpost or *armação* located in the mainland, right across the island's North Bay. He reported the stunning figure of 400 whales killed per winter in the heyday of whaling, in the late eighteenth century. Those Leviathans swam gracefully as close as the narrows that separate the island from the mainland. But this was soon to change. The slaughtering

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had grown so rampant – both locally and globally – that in the winter of 1803 only ten animals had been killed. Langsdorff also noted that most labourers engaged in whaling were black slaves². Nilton was one of them.

Legend has it that when the boats set out in search of whales, he used to give the following instruction to the harpooners:

‘Shoot at the large ones! Just the large ones! They come after the calves so that they don't stray from the pod’.

When approaching these animals, the crew noticed that the black man went missing. Right after that, a whale calf was seen swimming alongside their boat. The trick lured the adult whales to their death as the men hurled their harpoons pointblank at them. Back to the port, Nilton mysteriously reappeared; it became evident that he had shape-shifted into a whale calf.

Nilton was also famous for having turned into a viper biting a neighbour to death in an act of vengeance. The victim, I learned, had sold a slave woman to a rancher from Lages, in the High Plains of southern Brazil. Nilton had murdered him because he could not bear the pain of seeing his beloved one taken away to the back country for good.

Nilton's whale-hunting yarn contains an ancient magic ritual based in the superstitious belief that ‘like produces like’, that is, results analogous to those desired can be achieved by reenactment or simple imitation. Sir James G. Frazer, a forerunner of the anthropological theory of magic, provides excellent examples of the role played by such practice

² P. Berger (comp.), *Ilha de Santa Catarina - Relatos de viajantes estrangeiros nos seculos XVIII e XIX.* (Florianopolis, 1984), 178-79.

in fishing and hunting communities which performed magic rituals to ensure an abundant food supply. According to Frazer the Nootka of British Columbia largely depended on fish, very abundant in their seas and rivers. However, if they failed to appear in the right season and the community was threatened by hunger, the sorcerer made a replica of a fish and placed it in the water, where schools usually appeared. The rite was thus the vehicle of the spell and the translation of the word into action³.

More examples of magic hunting rituals are seen in other native communities whose members perform ceremonial dances disguised as the animals they wish to catch. They pretend to spear them imitating the result to be achieved. Cave paintings depicting such rituals date back from the Stone Age.

The heyday of whaling extended from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries in bustling Nantucket, New England. Numerous ships sailed from that and other neighbouring harbours towards the Seven Seas in search of whales to exploit their blubber, spermaceti and baleen. It was the largest and most profitable maritime enterprise of those days. The favorite crew of American whalers were the Azorians⁴, who in the 1750s settled the coast of Santa Catarina, Brazil. Whaling stations were set up by these North Atlantic islanders who targeted the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*). Santa Catarina's waters were its breeding grounds.

Melville's *Moby Dick*, the most famous novel on this subject, provides the elements that complement this analysis. The book depicts the life on board the *Pequod*, a whaling ship. Its central theme is the fierce duel fought between Captain Ahab and Moby Dick, the whale. Ahab's

³ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 1922).

<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/f/frazer/james/golden/complete.html>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2006.

⁴ ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA. (London, 1962), vol. 23, 554.

insane hatred towards Moby Dick developed when the “white monster” crippled him for life⁵.

But our attention should now shift to the novel’s most mysterious character: Fedallah, the Parsee. He and four shipmates were dark-skinned and entered the scene like ghosts when conjured by Captain Ahab to chase Moby Dick. The unexpected presence of Fedallah and friends held the sailors in suspicious awe, for they had never been seen on board the *Pequod* before. Ishmael, the narrator of the story, refers to Fedallah, the Zoroastrian, as ‘the king of sorcery on board’. Ahab’s favorite harpooner reappeared when the captain ordered the *Pequod*’s blacksmith to make him a special harpoon with nail-stubs from racehorse shoes, the finest steel then known. According to him, the nails would ‘weld together like glue from the melted bones of murderers’. The blacksmith then forged the steel into the shaft and head of a harpoon, and fitted Ahab’s razors into it for barbs. When the harpoon head was still redhot Ahab baptized it ‘In the name of the devil’ with blood drawn from the three savage harpooners. A quenching of death was thus guaranteed. In this precise moment Fedallah bowed down to the fire to cast a spell.

That was a magic hunting ritual, like the one performed by some Indian tribes who smear their arrowheads with the blood of stinging insects, so that they seek their prey with the same accuracy and determination of the insects. Likewise, having been dipped into savage blood, Ahab’s harpoon would viciously and relentlessly zero in on Moby Dick.

Both Nilton and Fedallah belonged to different ethnic groups from

⁵ H. Melville. *Moby Dick* (New York, 1926). <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2489>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2006.

that of their Caucasian masters and shipmates. The idea of a different ethnicity is closely related to exotic, heathen beliefs, the realm of evil powers which consequently accounts for their sorcery. It is also noteworthy how both stories refer to the harpooners' use of magic to render themselves invisible/visible at will. In addition, Nilton is also able to shift shapes when performing his hunting magic.

From time immemorial men have resorted to hunting magic, especially when their frailty was confronted with much more powerful beasts. Since the whale is the largest animal on earth, it is no wonder that such rituals still lingered in whaling. In these two stories, I am led to believe that we are dealing with a case of simple cultural diffusion. As mentioned above, the favourite crewmen of American whalers were the Azorians, who in turn brought whaling to the coasts of southern Brazil, together with their rich folklore.

I lack the evidence to categorically conclude that sorcery was a customary practice among whalers. However, I am amazed to find that both the oral tradition of Azorian settlers in Brazil and the literature of a far-away country record the presence of warlocks on board whale boats. Is it sheer coincidence? Maybe we should not rule out the possibility that even our most far-fetched popular beliefs could reflect deep-rooted structures of the human mind, which would account for parallels in practically all cultures, at all times.

I sit before the Sea and sadly wonder if it is still possible to conjure up a sorcerer who, unlike Nilton or Fedallah, could bring back the whales to dance joyfully in the waters from which human greed once ousted them. ❧❧❧